**3a Page 34 AUDIOSCRIPT**

Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

1.17

Hello everyone … one moment, I’ll just adjust my microphone … OK, that’s better. I can see a lot of hopeful-looking faces out there. I’m speaking to a government committee tomorrow and I hope they look as bright-eyed as you do … Let me just say that I’m afraid that those of you who have come looking for immediate answers to overpopulation are going to be disappointed, but I hope I can at least give you some cause for optimism. I’m not going to speak for too long because I’d like to hear what you have to say too, but let me tell you first how I see the situation …

In 1798 an English economist, Thomas Malthus, claimed that the population always grows faster than the food supply, until war, disease or famine arrive to reduce the number of people. A century and a half later in 1968, Paul Ehrlich wrote in his book The Population Bomb that medical science was keeping too many people alive and that we had failed to control the birth rate. He predicted that as a result hundreds of millions of people would soon starve to death.

But his bomb was a dud. Yes, medical science has extended life expectancy and the population carries on growing: around seven billion today and it will probably peak at around nine billion by 2050. But mass starvation? It hasn’t happened. Why? Because science stepped in with better seeds and better pesticides to boost food production and it’s about to step in again with nanotechnology, which will in turn help us to engineer safer and cheaper foods.

So what about overpopulation? Let me give you a fact: if in 2045 there are nine billion people in the world, the population density will still only be half that of France today. And no one complains about overcrowding there: France is the world’s favourite holiday destination! Some of the new megacities of Asia might not be such pleasant places to live … but the problem is not just the number of people. The problem is how people consume resources.

By 2030 more than a billion people in the developing world will belong to the ‘global middle class’. That’s a good thing. But it will be a bad thing for the planet if those people start eating meat and driving big cars every day. Some, ultra-cautious, people say we should bring in wartime emergency measures to conserve resources. I don’t think that’s the answer, but then I’m a scientist at heart even if I’m semi-retired now. For me the answer lies in innovations like biofuels and other alternative energy sources …

Life

I’ll talk about these specific solutions in the second part of my talk but let’s just go back to Malthus for a moment. People, he argued, are basically lazy. They won’t do anything unless they are forced to by necessity. But what he didn’t take into account is that faced with disaster people are not lazy. Mankind and science will rise to the challenge … that is my sincere belief … Oh, by the way, one more thing: the necessity train arrives in half an hour …